

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

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E.O. 11652: NA

TAGS: ELAB, BE

SUBJECT: PETROLEUM STRIKE THREATENED AGAIN

REF: BRUSSELS 00766

SUMMARY. IMPATIENT WORKERS IN PETROLEUM SECTOR ARE THREATENING ALL-OUT STRIKE AFTER WEEK OF SLOWDOWN WHICH HAS ALREADY AFFECTED FLOW OF PETROLEUM PRODUCTS TO BELGIAN RETAILERS. ISSUE IS WHETHER WORKERS OF INDEPENDENT TRANSPORT COMPANIES WHICH HAUL SOME PETROLEUM PRODUCTS SHOULD COME UNDER PETROLEUM INDUSTRY AGREEMENT. PRIME MINISTER TINDEMANS HAS CHARGED MINLABOR CALIFICE WITH SEEKING COMPROMISE SOLUTION TO THIS JURISDICTIONAL DISPUTE. WHILE GOVERNMENT IS EAGER FOR QUICK COMPROMISE, A STRIKE AFFECTING ALL POL DISTRIBUTION IN BELGIUM IS DEISTINCTLY POSSIBLE. END SUMMARY.

1. LINGERING DISPUTE IN PETROLEUM SECTOR WHICH EMPLOYS 5,000 WORKERS IS NOW COMING TO HEAD AND COULD LEAD TO INDUSTRY-WIDE STRIKE NEXT WEEK. AS PART OF AGREEMENT ON 1975-76 CONTRACT (REFTEL) THERE WAS UNDERSTANDING THAT MINISTRY OF EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR WOULD RESOLVE LONG-STANDING DISPUTE WHETHER INDEPENDENT TRANSPORT COMPANIES WHICH DO SUBCONTRACT HAULING OF PETROLEUM PRODUCTS SHOULD BE COVERED BY PETROLEUM INDUSTRY

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AGREEMENT. TO FORCE ISSUE UNIONS INSTITUTED SLOWDOWN

AND LIMITED STRIKE ACTION FEBRUARY 28. WORKERS AT ALL MAJOR POL DISTRIBUTORS (PRIMARILY ANTWERP AREA) REFUSED LOAD INDEPENDENT COMPANY TRUCKS. RESULT WAS REDUCED SUPPLIES FOR THOSE COMPANIES RELYING ON INDEPENDENT TRANSPORT.

2. GOVERNMENT HAS NOW MOVED TO RESOLVE DISPUTE BEFORE BELGIAN ECONOMY IS SERIOUSLY AFFECTED. A CABINET COMMITTEE CONVENED BY PRIME MINISTER MARCH 6 INSTRUCTED MINISTER OF EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR CALIFICE TO CONVOKE THE BIPARTITE COMMISSION (LABOR-MANAGEMENT) FOR PETROLEUM SECTOR MARCH 7. IT WILL HAVE THE DIFFICULT TASK OF FINDING A COMPROMISE SOLUTION- PRESUMABLE BY DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN INDEPENDENT TRANSPORT COMPANIES PRIMARILY ENGAGED IN POL HAULING AND THOSE FOR WHOM THIS IS ONLY MARGINAL ACTIVITY. TRANSPORT INDUSTRY CONTRACT IS LESS EXPENSIVE FOR MANAGEMENT THAN NEW PETROLEUM AGREEMENT. UNION HAVE THREATENED COMPLETE WALKOUT IF NO AGREEMENT IS REACHED BY MARCH 10.

3. COMMENT: WITH SUPPLIES ALREADY RUNNING LOW FOR SOME COMPANIES, A CONTINUATION OR WORSENING OF THIS JURISDICTIONAL DISPUTE COULD OCCASION BROAD ADVERSE EFFECT ON BELGIAN ECONOMY, INCLUDING REFUELING OPERATIONS FOR AIRLINES. THIS CONFLICT ONLY ADDS TO GOVERNMENT'S OTHER LABOR PROBLEMS IN PUBLIC SECTOR INVOLVING WEEK LONG TEACHER WARNING-STRIKE, THREATENED POSTAL STRIKE AND WATER WORKERS DISPUTE. STRIKE OF LATTER HALTED MARCH 5 WHEN GOVERNMENT REQUISITIONED WORKERS AND RE-OPENED NEGOTIATIONS. GOVERNMENT HAS EVERY REASON TO RESOLVE PETROLEUM DISPUTE QUICKLY.
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